

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
November 6, 2008

LAGUNA INTERPRETIVE CENTER

File No. 07-060
Project Manager: Maxene Spellman

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$700,000 to the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation to construct the Laguna Interpretive Center at the Laguna Learning Center site overlooking the main channel of the Laguna de Santa Rosa, in southwestern Sonoma County.

LOCATION: The site for the proposed Laguna Interpretive Center is approximately one mile north of the City of Sebastopol on City of Santa Rosa annexed land along the main channel of the Laguna de Santa Rosa in southwestern Sonoma County. (Exhibit 1)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Concept Plan](#)

Exhibit 3: [Context Map Showing Laguna, Roads & Grazing Lands](#)

Exhibit 4: [Photos of Property and Views](#)

Exhibit 5: [Project Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (sections 31160-31165):

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed seven hundred thousand dollars (\$700,000) to the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation (“the Foundation”) for the construction of the Laguna Interpretive Center overlooking the main channel of the Laguna de Santa Rosa. Prior to disbursement of Conservancy funds:

1. The Foundation shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy a detailed work program, schedule, and budget, a sign plan acknowledging the Conservancy, the names and qualifications of any contractors to be employed in carrying out the project, and proof that the remaining non-state money has been secured.
2. The Foundation, the Conservancy and the City of Santa Rosa, the owner of the property on which the Laguna Interpretive Center is to be built, shall enter into and record an agreement

pursuant to Public Resources Code Section 31116(c) that is sufficient to protect the public interest.

3. The Foundation shall provide written confirmation from the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (District), the holder of a Conservation Easement over the project site, that the improvements proposed for construction under this authorization are permitted under the Conservation Easement.

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program, Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code Sections 31160-31165.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines last updated by the Conservancy on September 20, 2007.
3. The Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation is a nonprofit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

The Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation is developing the Laguna Learning Center on a 7-acre historic site overlooking the main channel of the Laguna de Santa Rosa. The proposed project is to construct a new Laguna Interpretive Center which will serve as the centerpiece of the Learning Center. (See Exhibit 2, Concept Plan.) The Foundation will offer educational programs at the Interpretive Center, with the goal to promote stewardship of the important Laguna de Santa Rosa wetland complex. Educational programs will inform the public about its rich biological diversity, Native American heritage, agricultural legacy, and hands-on restoration techniques. The site will also be easily accessible from the system of Laguna trails being developed by the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (“the Open Space District”), and will provide a gateway to the Laguna for local residents and visitors from all over the Bay Area.

If authorized, the Conservancy will provide \$700,000 to the Foundation to construct the 5,200 square foot Laguna Interpretive Center in the style of other on-site historic structures while incorporating “green building” techniques including photovoltaic electrical panels. The proposed Interpretive Center will house an interactive exhibit hall, a classroom, and scientific research facilities where thousands of elementary through college age students and adults will learn and apply hands-on restoration techniques in the natural laboratory of the Laguna de Santa Rosa. An indoor-outdoor layout will allow larger gatherings and exhibitions during dry months. The outdoor area will include permanent mounts for spotting scopes and exhibits interpreting the lifestyles of Southern Pomo and Coast Miwok prior to the arrival of Western settlers.

Using other sources of funding, the Foundation completed rehabilitation of a Civil War era homestead for its administrative center, and plans to rehabilitate other historic landmark structures including a water tower and two barns. One barn will serve as a native plant nursery to support restoration efforts, and the other will house additional educational programs about Sonoma County's early agricultural legacy. Landscaping will create pathways, a pond surrounded by native vegetation, and a garden and orchard reminiscent of a nineteenth century family farm. (See Exhibit 2.)

The Foundation was established in 1989 to preserve, restore and enhance the Laguna de Santa Rosa, and to provide opportunities to better understand and appreciate this wetland area. To carry out its mission the Foundation developed a *Learning Laguna* program for students, worked to raise awareness and understanding of the biological resources found in the Laguna, and restored and enhanced its degraded channels, wetlands and uplands. The proposed Interpretive Center will heighten the public's appreciation for the Laguna, serve as a hub for restoration work, and increase the number of students and grade levels its education program can serve. The field research station proposed as part of the Laguna Interpretive Center will also create opportunities to partner with more high schools, Santa Rosa Junior College, and Sonoma State University, enabling high school, undergraduate, and graduate students to benefit from the Laguna as a natural laboratory.

Site Description: The Laguna de Santa Rosa is the largest freshwater wetland complex and the richest area of wildlife habitat in Sonoma County, consisting of a mosaic of marshes, ponds, creeks, vernal pools and oak woodlands. The Laguna is a major stop on the Pacific Flyway for migratory birds and home to a diversity of plant and animal life including 300 varieties of plants, over 200 bird species, river otter, bobcat, coyote, gray fox, mountain lion, and many federally and state listed species. Prior to the arrival of the Europeans the Laguna hosted one of the largest populations of Native Americans on the North American continent due to its abundance of natural resources. Today it provides important wildlife habitat, magnificent views, and outdoor recreation in the heart of Sonoma County's most populous region.

The 4-acre Laguna Learning Center, of which the proposed Interpretive Center is the centerpiece, is perfectly positioned to support the Foundation to plan, organize and logistically stage its habitat restoration efforts throughout the Laguna now and in the future. While the site is at an urban interface, it overlooks to the west the Laguna's main channel, and is located between areas conserved by the Open Space District and the California Department of Fish and Game ("DFG"). Both these areas are under active restoration by the Foundation: the Conservancy-funded Middle Reach Restoration Project is to the south. DFG's Laguna Wildlife Area, where the Foundation conducted the control of invasive *Ludwigia* and is planning long-term restoration, is located to the north. (See Exhibit 1, Project Location and Site Map.)

The Laguna Learning Center is sited on land owned by the City of Santa Rosa and protected by the Open Space District through a Conservation Easement which would allow for the proposed development. The Conservation Easement permits the use of this upland location for recreational and educational purposes and, thus, would appear to allow for construction of the improvements proposed under this project, since they are associated with such uses. To ensure that this is the

case, the proposed authorization requires that the Open Space District confirm this prior to disbursement of any Conservancy funds for the project.

The City zoned the site as Rural Residential with a Historic overlay. The proposed project is consistent with this zoning.

In the late 1980's the City designated the site on which the Laguna Learning Center is located and the structures on the site as a Cultural Landmark. The City has previously reviewed the plans for the Learning Center, including the Interpretive Center, and has concluded that the development of the site is both consistent with and serves to preserve and enhance the cultural landmark. The site overlooks the main channel of the Laguna de Santa Rosa. However, at approximately 2,000 feet away from the flood plain and located more than 85 feet in elevation, the Learning Center's upland location will not be subject to flooding even in the most severe projections for sea level rise in the Laguna area. Indeed, the survival of the property's one hundred and fifty year old structures attests to the positioning of the site to avoid flooding even in the wettest of years.

Because of its location, the Center will become the gateway to exploring the Laguna's soon-to-be trail system, the Laguna de Santa Rosa Wetlands Trail. In early 2009 the Open Space District will begin construction of the Conservancy funded first phase of this system. Construction of later phases of the trail will lead it directly to the Laguna Learning Center. When the trail system is completed, the Center will serve as a literal entry to the Laguna for local residents and visitors, enabling them to learn about the Laguna's rich biology and history and then to head out on the trail to explore it for themselves.

Project History: The Conservancy has recognized the importance of the Laguna de Santa Rosa as a regionally significant natural and recreational resource since 2000. In that year the Conservancy provided a grant to the Sonoma Land Trust (SLT) to prepare a Resource Protection Plan for the Core Planning Area. The Resource Protection Plan, completed in May 2003, addressed multiple site-specific resource issues and targeted priority properties for acquisition. It continues to provide valuable information about the Laguna's resources and guide acquisition priorities. In December 2003, the Conservancy provided a grant to the Foundation to prepare a Restoration and Management Plan. The resulting *Enhancing and Caring for the Laguna* was completed in 2006. It continues to inform restoration and research efforts, and recommends implementation of the proposed project. In December 2005, the Conservancy funded the aforementioned Middle Reach Restoration Project to restore approximately one mile of riparian corridor and 10 acres of upland oak savannah. The Foundation has achieved several milestones set out in the approved work program for the ongoing Middle Reach project. The Laguna Learning Center, including the proposed Laguna Interpretive Center, will provide a much needed staging area, volunteer center, and other resources to complete the Middle Reach project and other future restoration efforts.

The history of the Conservancy's involvement to provide recreation in the Laguna includes the following: as part of the grant to SLT in 2000, the Conservancy also funded a public access plan and restoration planting for the 8-acre Laguna Uplands property owned by the Foundation. This resulted in the construction of the Laguna Uplands trail and signage located on the urban edge of Sebastopol. In January 2001 the Conservancy provided a grant to the City of Sebastopol to construct a nearly one mile loop trail, remove exotic plants and restore oak woodland habitat

within the trail corridor located in the northeast corner of the Laguna. This trail was completed in 2002. In January 2007 the Conservancy funded the construction of the aforementioned Laguna de Santa Rosa Wetlands Trail that will ultimately connect to the Laguna Learning Center.

After the City designated the site as a Cultural Landmark #1, it developed a plan to restore the homestead building for historical preservation and education. However, the City was unable to fund its implementation. Now, through a 50-year lease agreement with the City, the Foundation has been able to prepare plans for the restoration of the historical buildings and the overall development of the site as the Laguna Learning Center and has initiated the building restoration. With the assurance that the long-term lease provides, the Foundation has been able to initiate a fund-raising campaign to complete rehabilitation of the 1860's structures, install native plant landscaping, and construct the proposed Laguna Interpretive Center.

The Laguna Learning Center will provide an anchor for existing and future activities. Its Interpretive Center will serve a wide array of Sonoma County students and attract visitors from throughout the Bay Area. Together the proposed project and impending trail system will help ensure the future stewardship of the Laguna de Santa Rosa.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$700,000
Foundation funds and private donations	<u>\$1,280,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$1,980,000

Conservancy funding for the construction of the Laguna Interpretive Center is expected to come from the fiscal year 2006/07 appropriation to the Conservancy from the Water Security, Clean Drinking Water, Coastal Beach Protection Fund of 2002 (Proposition 50). Proposition 50 authorizes the use of these funds for the purpose of developing facilities to promote public access to and participation in the conservation of land, water and wildlife resources, including nature centers that are in or adjacent to watersheds and wetlands that provide wildlife viewing, outdoor experiences, and conservation education programs to the public and to students.

The use of Proposition 50 funds for the construction of the Laguna Interpretive Center will accomplish these purposes. The proposed Interpretive Center is located overlooking the main channel of the Laguna de Santa Rosa, and will house an interactive exhibit hall, a classroom and scientific research facilities where thousands of elementary through college age students and adults will learn and apply hands-on restoration techniques in the natural laboratory of the Laguna. The outdoor area will include permanent mounts for spotting scopes and interpretive exhibits.

In addition, as required by Proposition 50, the proposed project is consistent with local and regional plans (Water Code Section 79507). *Enhancing and Caring for the Laguna* is the restoration and management plan for the Laguna watershed, developed through a stakeholder process that included local and regional government. The Laguna Learning Center is identified as a priority objective for raising public attention to and enjoyment of the Laguna.

Finally, Proposition 50 suggests priority be given to projects that are operated by nonprofit

organizations and that are designed to serve children from urban areas. While there are other programs in the immediate area that serve children from urban Santa Rosa, the proposed project will provide additional programs designed to expose children to and nurture stewardship of the Laguna de Santa Rosa. (Water Code Section 79571).

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

This project is undertaken pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Section 31160-31165, to address resource and recreation goals in the San Francisco Bay Area. In particular, the Conservancy may award grants to assist in the implementation of the adopted plans of local governments and special districts (Section 31162(c)), to promote, assist, and enhance projects that provide open space and natural areas that are accessible to urban populations for recreational and educational purposes (Section 31162(d)), and to facilitate environmental education related to preservation, restoration, or enhancement of watershed resources (Section 31165). As discussed in detail in the Project Description section of this staff recommendation, above, and in the paragraph below, the proposed project achieves each of these objectives.

This project is appropriate for prioritization under the selection criteria set forth in Section 31163(c). (The proposed project is supported by adopted local or regional plans, such as: the Association of Bay Area Government's *FOCUS, A Development and Conservation Strategy for the San Francisco Bay Area*, in which the Laguna de Santa Rosa is identified as a Priority Conservation Area (June, 2008); *Enhancing and Caring for the Laguna* (2006) as described under "Project History" above; the District's *Connecting Communities and the Land, A Long-Range Acquisition Plan* (2006) ("Water, Wildlife and Natural Areas" and "Recreation and Education" chapters); and the Land Use Element and Resource Conservation Element of the Sonoma County General Plan (1989). The project also includes multi-jurisdictional participation from the County of Sonoma, the City of Santa Rosa, and the District, and serves a regional constituency from the north San Francisco Bay and beyond. The proposed project can be implemented in a timely way because of the strong support from surrounding jurisdictions, the Sonoma County Water Agency, the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, state officials and others. Also, rehabilitation of a historic structure has already been completed. Finally, the proposed project includes matching funds from other sources as described under "Project Financing" above.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2007 STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 11, Objective B** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will result in construction of a new educational and recreational facility that will increase public access to educational programs and interpretation about the Laguna de Santa Rosa.

Consistent with **Goal 11, Objective L** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed authorization will implement a project that includes ADA-compliant elements.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated on September 20, 2007, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** Support for the project is demonstrated by both financial and in-kind donations, and by letters of support. Financial or in-kind support for this project are provided to the Foundation by the City of Santa Rosa, the City of Sebastopol, Sonoma County Water Agency, the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, Gallo Family Vineyards, the Community Foundation of Sonoma County and many private citizens. Letters of support include those received from Congresswoman Lynn Woolsey, Senator Patricia Wiggins, Assemblyperson Noreen Evans, Assemblyperson Jared Huffman, Assemblyperson Patty Berg, Sonoma County Supervisor Mike Reilly, and the City of Santa Rosa. (See Exhibit 5, Project Letters.)
4. **Location:** The proposed project is located in the Laguna de Santa Rosa in Sonoma County which is within the jurisdiction of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program. See the "Site Description" section above.
5. **Need:** The Foundation is not able to implement the construction of the Laguna Interpretive Center without the Conservancy's assistance. This project is needed to expand educational and recreational opportunities to students and adults, and to focus public attention and stewardship on the biologically and culturally significant Laguna de Santa Rosa.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The Laguna de Santa Rosa is among the most biologically diverse regions in northwestern California. The Laguna Learning Center and the proposed Interpretive Center as its centerpiece will provide educational programs, research facilities, support for restoration projects, and a nexus for the system of Laguna trails being developed. The proposed project will therefore benefit restoration of the regionally significant Laguna de Santa Rosa, and provide a gateway for exploring it to residents of the County and visitors from the around the Bay Area.

Additional Criteria:

7. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
8. **Innovation:** The proposed Interpretive Center will include solar electrical power generation. Outdoor irrigation will come entirely from tertiary-treated recycled water from the City of Santa Rosa's Sub-regional Sanitation System.

9. **Readiness:** The Foundation has the capacity to continue to raise the balance of funds needed to complete the project. Also, the construction documents are 80% complete so that when remaining funds and permits are obtained (expected by the end of 2010), the Foundation will be able to complete the project in a timely manner.
10. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See “Project History” above.”
11. **Cooperation:** The City of Santa Rosa, the landowner, is cooperating with the Foundation to donate all utilities and water for the project, and has agreed to lease the property to the Foundation for the nominal amount of one dollar a year, providing a substantial savings for the Foundation. Also, the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria are looking forward to collaborating with the Foundation to develop exhibits interpreting the lifestyles of the Native Americans who occupied the Laguna prior to the arrival of Westerners.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The Laguna Interpretive Center project involves construction of a 5,200 square foot educational and visitor center at a 7-acre impacted site near the Laguna de Santa Rosa floodplain. The immediately surrounding grazing and farm land has been farmed for the past 150 years and is not environmentally sensitive. The floodplain is separated from the project site by approximately 2,000 feet of land that has been historically grazed and farmed. (See Exhibit 3, Context Map Showing Laguna, Roads & Grazing Lands.)

On August 4, 2005 the City of Santa Rosa found that the proposed project is categorically exempt from CEQA, under 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15303, which applies to construction and location of a limited numbers of new, small facilities or structures; installation of small new equipment and facilities in small structures; and the conversion of existing small structures from one use to another where only minor modifications are made in the exterior of the structure. In particular, the City relied on the example given in subsection (c) which confirms that the exemption of Section 15303 extends to projects involving construction of facilities such as commercial buildings, provided they do not exceed 10,000 square feet in floor area, are located on sites zoned for such use, do not involve the use of significant amounts of hazardous substances, are located where all necessary public services and facilities are available and the surrounding area is not environmentally sensitive.

Here, as the City concluded, the project site zoning designation of Rural Residential with a Historic overlay allows for institutions offering environmental awareness, and the City specifically approved the Laguna Learning Center use as consistent with the zoning. Further, neither the buildings nor the subsequent site activities involve the use of significant hazardous substances. To the contrary, the buildings are being designed to incorporate environmentally sensitive features and to lessen any environmental impact. As also confirmed by the City, the project site has all necessary public services and facilities. Finally, although intentionally located near the Laguna flood plain, the project will not result in environmentally significant impacts to it for the following reasons:

- (a) The project site and surrounding properties contain no native vegetation or species of special concern that would otherwise be impacted by the proposed project.

- (b) The project will not develop impermeable surfaces, other than rooftops, to create unnecessary runoff.
- (c) The road abutting the project site has drainage on both sides to capture, slow and draw away runoff which will then not flow directly to the Laguna.
- (d) No adverse impact to the water table or to subsurface flow to the Laguna is expected because use of fresh and tertiary recycled water is donated by the City of Santa Rosa and the Sonoma County Water Agency.
- (e) Construction activities will comply with Sonoma County's sediment control ordinance which requires use of silt fencing, straw wattles and other mitigation measures to minimize offsite runoff during construction.
- (f) The proposed Laguna Interpretive Center will incorporate photovoltaic power generation and other energy efficiency features, both for demonstration purposes and to minimize carbon impacts.

Conservancy staff agrees with the reasoning of the City and, on that basis, also agrees with the conclusion that the project is categorically exempt from CEQA review pursuant to Section 15303.

Staff will file a CEQA Notice of Exemption upon Conservancy approval of the project.